



Oriental Mills added to National Register of Historic Places

The North End mill -- parts of which date to 1860 -- produced cotton textiles, silk, rayon and nylon for generations before the complex was converted to office space.

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PROVIDENCE -- Oriental Mills, a collection of buildings in the North End built between 1860 and 1986, has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places as an example of textile mill architecture and engineering.

The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission said in announcing the designation:

"Oriental Mills is significant for its longstanding use as a textile factory, beginning with cotton fabrics, then silk threads, and finally synthetics. The buildings retain a high degree of architectural integrity and reflect the distinctive characteristics of mid 19th- to early 20th-century textile-mill architecture and engineering.

". . . The mill complex, on land bounded by Admiral, Whipple and Oriental streets, and by Route 146, consists of several linked single- and multi-story brick, wood-frame, and steel-frame industrial buildings. These buildings are connected in some cases by party walls, and in other cases, by narrow alleys and irregular spaces that were later framed and roofed over.

"Many of the buildings within the complex share common construction materials and architectural features, including shallow-pitch and flat roofs; fire-resistive, wood-frame interior construction; and brick walls with segmental-arch window openings.

"The industrial development of the North End of Providence in the mid-19th century was driven by crowded conditions downtown, the increasing size of cotton manufacturing companies and the extension of the Providence and Worcester Railroad to the area in 1847.

"Owners of farm properties and country estates sold off large parcels of land, which were platted and subdivided. New industries included the Corliss Steam Engine plant (1849), Silver Spring Bleaching and Dyeing Works (1864-70), and the Wanskuck Company (1862).

"Wealthy from the East India trade, Alfred Augustus Reed bought land known as the Greenland Vale on Whipple Street and formed the Oriental Mills [Mfg. Co.] around 1860. He hired Providence civil engineer Niles Schubarth, designer of Swan Point Cemetery and [the] Cove

Park basin and promenade, to build a small cotton works. The Oriental Mills spun and wove cotton to make cloth and produced print cloths and cambric.

"Reed expanded his empire by converting several mills in Warwick into the Oriental Print works for dyeing and printing cotton cloth. After more than 30 years of cotton manufacturing, the Oriental Mills Manufacturing Co. suffered financial failure caused by the Panic of 1893 and went out of business.

"In 1893, J.P. Campbell purchased the property, replaced the outdated machinery and produced cotton goods and woollens there. By 1900, the J.P. Campbell & Co. complex consisted of the main building with an attached boiler house and two other buildings connected by bridges; a one-story brick office building; a two-story brick storehouse; and a one-story waste house. Some of the land west of the mill complex was developed for worker housing, particularly on Whipple and Fillmore streets.

"In 1901, Campbell & Co. employed 250 workers who operated 20,000 spindles, 500 looms, 65 carding machines and 3 pickers. The operation ran smoothly for 14 years but collapsed during the Panic of 1907.

"In 1908, the land, buildings, and contents of the J.P. Campbell & Co. at Oriental Mill were auctioned to the highest bidder. Edgar J. Lowenstein purchased most of the buildings and land; and the machinery, storehouse and land to the south were auctioned off separately.

"Lowenstein established the American Silk Spinning Co. and erected multiple additions to expand the facility and to meet the rapidly increasing demand for silk yarn. In the 1930s and 1940s, American Silk's new synthetics and silk blends placed it at the forefront of the textile industry. It was the one of the first firms in Providence to manufacture rayon. During World War II, the company developed techniques for spinning new fiber from discarded nylon fibers and silk stockings.

"The Top Co., of Boston, purchased American Silk in 1959 and continued to run it until 1962, when [it] sold the property to the Union Paper and Union Transbag Cos. owned by Alan and Melvin Frank. The buildings are presently used for plastic printing and office space."

The National Register nomination for Oriental Mills was prepared by Virginia Adams, Jenny Fields and Mark Rayburn of the Public Archaeology Laboratory Inc.

According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, the mill is being rehabilitated for commercial offices, another economic transformation assisted by historic-preservation tax credits.